

# Intermedia Composition

University of Virginia | Fall 2015

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Website: TBD

## Description

This graduate seminar is organized around questions related to composing and music-making within today's rapidly changing technoculture. Using the concept of intermedia as a point of departure, we will think about how our field(s) and practices have evolved, explore the media structures within which we currently operate, and speculate about future trajectories in music composition, sound art, and performance.

The course format is designed to provide a weekly space and time for critical discussion about music & technology and to engage with perspectives outside of our own practices. The first part of the semester is structured around short readings and participant-led discussions on topics related to sound, performance, listening, and theory (critical, musical). The second half of the semester brings these conversations and perspectives to our own work—you will propose a project, present work-in-progress, and participate in constructive discussions and critiques informed by relevant readings/materials. This course is open to graduate students working with/thinking about sound and new media through any lens (CCS/T).

## Questions

Music, like any medium, carries a set of established protocols and practices that help us to say that something is music—the primacy of sound, the use of specialized instruments, the concert frame, etc. Theater, Dance, and Film each have their own set of culturally agreed upon practices that help us to determine a play from a dance or a board game or a theoretical exercise. How do we play into and against these expectations? Can we make work that exists between these predefined spaces? things that move from one space to another? Why would we want to? Can these protocols be leveraged for critical and/or expressive effect? Who is the audience? Where are the performers? What is lost in working between traditional mediums/protocols? What types of expression are made possible?

A 'piece' or 'project' today is a many-sided creation. A composer writes a quartet that might be represented as a score, performed live in concert, recorded in a studio, videotaped, uploaded to the internet, and written about by the composer and maybe a blogger or ten. A quick tour of composer web sites reveals that a piece might also be part of a project—one example within a larger exploration, a performance of system X, or an instance from series Y. A project might have multiple lives. Music that was conceived as a concert work is reborn as an installation, a theater piece, a research project, or an interactive web experience. These new stages and mediums can be resisted or embraced, but they are shifting our field. How do we navigate the changing landscape of sound, art, and technology?

## Course Objectives

- Become familiar with past practices that blur conventional boundaries—art/technology, theory/practice, composition/listening
- Create new work that explores/examines the intermedial nature of music-making today
- Animate your practice through conversations and critique
- Develop a language to talk about composing, technology, and intermediality

## Structure & Grading

### 50% Attendance & Participation

You are expected to read the materials for the week and prepare thoughts or questions about the readings/listenings. Unexcused absences beyond two will result in the deduction of a letter grade. Participation includes in-class discussion & assignments, online or asynchronous discussion, & documentation. Assignments are due on the date they are listed in the syllabus.

### 10% Presentation / Discussion

Each participant will give a short presentation to contextualize a topic and lead the related discussion for one of the weeks during the first part of the semester.

### 10% Mid-semester project

### 40% Final Project

10.15 - project proposal – 10%

11.05 - work-in-progress showing – 10%

12.?? - final presentation/article/show/documentation - 20%

The form of the final project is open, but it should relate in some way to the themes of the course. Final projects must be significant in scope, but do not necessarily need to be single works. They can be a series of exercises, a sustained practice, the artifacts of a software system, etc. Final projects will be presented for the public at the end of the semester.

## Materials

Most of the materials are available on the course website. Check the website and view all materials that have been posted by Monday at 5pm for the following Thursday's class.

There are hundreds of texts that might prove interesting in parallel to this course. Here are a few that are closely related:

- *Listening Through the Noise* by Joanna Demers
- *Noise, Water, Meat* by Douglas Kahn
- *Sound Ideas* by Aden Evans
- *Noise* by Jacques Attali
- *Pink Noises* by Tara Rodgers
- *Background Noise: Perspectives on Sound Art* by Brandon Labelle
- *Mainframe Experimentalism* by Hannah Higgins and Douglas Kahn
- *New Media Reader* by Nick Montfort and Noah Wardrip-Fruin

## Policies

This success of this course depends on the investment of the participants. Late assignments will not be accepted without prior approval. Of course, exceptions will be made for emergencies and illness provided there is adequate documentation.

Please speak with me during office hours if you have a disability or other condition that might require modification of the course procedures or exercises. For information visit <http://www.virginia.edu/studenthealth/sdac/sdac.html>

I expect you to follow the University of Virginia Academic Code. Production courses often call into question traditional notions of fair use, copyright, and plagiarism. If you have questions about a specific project, meet with me during office hours.

I will make every effort to reply to emails within 24 hours. If I don't reply within 24 hours, please email me again.

*This syllabus and schedule will change as we move through the course*

## Week 1 Introduction

Introduction and logistics. Overview of the course structure and expectations. Group activities.

## Week 2 Intermedia

Intermedia. If we take a broad definition of media—tools that store and deliver information—what does it mean to be inter, between or among, media? It is helpful to think of established media as carrying implicit pacts or protocols that allow us to decode its information. There is an inherent familiarity in established mediums (don't clap! 2<sup>nd</sup> movement). Intermedia asks the audience or consumer to navigate between these familiar protocols—to refigure, reconsider. It asks people to *perform* or *compose* the meaning of a work based on context, experience, content, form, self, etc.

**Readings:** *Statement on Intermedia* by Dick Higgins  
Introduction to *Deep Listening* by Pauline Oliveros  
*Cycles, Spheres and Suitcases* by Seth Kim-Cohen and Andrew Morgan

**Assignment:** Prepare a 15 minute presentation about your work, your influences, and some of the ideas and goals you would like to explore this year. Try not to limit yourself. Take a risk and talk about those ideas, sounds, and patterns that are most exciting to you, even if they are pieces you may not yet have the confidence or requisite knowledge to realize.

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- Discussion
- Short presentations introducing your work to the class.

## Week 3 Performance/Play

How have new technologies changed what it means to play music? Here, *play* relates to traditional performance practices (concerts, shows, etc), but also to modes of listening to music, and experiencing sound more generally. How have concepts like automation and artificial intelligence, and technologies like laptops and smartphones, influenced what it means to play music? What new sound spaces have developed and are developing at the blurry boundaries between human - non-human and aesthetic - scientific?

**Readings:** *Critical Play, Ch. 1* by Mary Flanagan  
*Live Algorithms and The Future of Music* by George Lewis  
*Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (excerpt)  
*The Fluxus Workbook (skim)*

**Assignment:** Write 3 event scores. Be prepared to perform one of them (perform in the broadest sense). Shoot for no more than 5 minutes.

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- Discussion
- Event scores

## Week 4 Interactivity and Control

"We need to build instruments which transform us, instruments which allow us to explore states in between firm lands, hear different timing structures and sounds from unknown spaces. Inefficient and ineffective instruments which we learn to ride like wild bulls on a limitless plain."

~ Laetitia Sonami, *And now we leave gloves and other wearables to (small) dictators*

"To proceed from an assertion of what music has been to an assertion of what music, therefore, must be, is to commit a familiar fallacy; to proceed from an assertion of the properties of the electronic medium to an assertion of what music produced by this medium therefore must be, is not only to commit the same fallacy (and thus do fallacies make strange bedfellows), but to misconstrue that compositional revolution of which the electronic medium has been the enabling instrument. For this revolution has effected, summarily and almost completely, a transfer of the limits of musical composition from the limits of the non-electronic medium and the human performer, not to the limits of this most extensive and flexible of media but to those more restrictive, more intricate, far less well understood limits; the perceptual and conceptual capacities of the human auditor."

~ Milton Babbitt, *Perspectives of New Music*

**Readings:** *Playpens, Fireflies and Squeezables: New Musical Instruments for Bridging the Thoughtful & the Joyful* by Gil Weinberg  
*"What, for me, constitutes life in a sound?": Electronic Sounds as Lively and Differentiated Individuals* by Tara Rodgers  
*The Curious Interface* by Jane McGonigal  
*An Enactive Approach to Computer Music Performance* by David Wessel

**Assignment:** Create 10 (10!) short (1-3 sentence) project ideas that you might want to explore further as a final project in this class. Email them to me by midnight the Tuesday before class.

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- Discussion
- Group activity

## Week 5 Sampling Practices

Although sampling as a method is not new, the emergence and maturation of digital technologies have changed how and how much we sample. The speed and flexibility of computers have accelerated a cutup culture of rapid reanimation— assemblages, remixes, mashups, collages, and versions have all become popular forms. Digital sampling has also influenced what we sample. The indexical nature of recording and playback has replaced the formal and structural quotations of symbolic and oral traditions with a sampling practice that Mark Katz calls "performative quotation".

*"[Performative quotation] recreates all the details of timbre and timing that evoke and identify a unique sound event, whether two seconds of Clyde Stubblefield's drumming or the slow, unsteady tapping rhythms produced as I type this sentence. In other words, traditional musical quotations typically cite works; samples cite performances."* ~ Katz

**Readings:** *What's Digital in Digital Music?* by Jonathan Sterne  
Kaffe Matthews Interview from *Pink Noises* by Tara Rodgers  
*Collage, cut up and pop mantras: Post-digital approaches to songwriting* by Lisa Busby – not out yet, working on getting it  
*Sampling Sexuality: Gender, Technology, and the Body in Dance Music* by Barbara Bradby

**Assignment:** Schedule a meeting with me during the next two weeks to discuss your final project proposal.

**Week 6      Group Critique / Discussion**

*Project 1 presentations and discussion in class*

**Week 7      Final Project Proposal Discussion**

**Assignment:**      Present your final project proposal for the class.

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The topics in second half of the class are flexible and will change based on the interests of the group and the types of projects people are working on. Listed below are some possible topics.

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**Week 8      Sound art, installation, & site specificity**

**Week 9      Composing & the Internet**

**Week 10      Bodies in digitally mediated music**

**Week 11      Work-in progress presentations**

*2 people – 1 hour each*

**Week 12      Work-in progress presentations**

*2 people – 1 hour each*

**Week 13      Work-in progress presentations**

*2 people – 1 hour each*

**Week 14      Public Presentations / Documentation Due**